

VZCZCXRO2655
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHDO #0237/01 0841116
ZNY EEEEE ZZH
P 241116Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY DOHA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7732
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1091
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0149
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1356

UNCLAS E F T O SECTION 01 OF 03 DOHA 000237

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/PPD AND NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: N/A
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [EG](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)
SUBJECT: CDA CRITICIZES ARAB MEDIA CHARTER, STRIKES BACK AT
AL JAZEERA AT BROOKINGS EVENT

REF: DOHA 154

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL A. RATNEY, FOR REASON 1.4 (B).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As a panelist at a public event sponsored by the Brookings-Doha Center on March 17, Charge expressed the USG's position that an Arab League charter proposing to limit satellite channels not be used to restrict media freedom (reftel). Charge said that media should be regulated not by politicians, but by professional associations and laws adopted by democratically elected legislatures, which are reviewed by independent courts. Co-panelist Ibrahim Helal of Al Jazeera agreed, speculating that the charter was aimed primarily at Egypt's domestic satellite media, while Egyptian human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim disagreed, asserting that the charter was aimed mainly at Al Jazeera. Both panelists suggested that the charter had the implicit backing of the USG. They also accused the United States of deliberately bombing Al Jazeera's news bureaus in Afghanistan and killing its correspondent in Iraq. Charge called such allegations ludicrous and offensive, and pointed out that Al Jazeera operates freely in the United States, despite the USG's concerns about its negative editorial slant. Qatari media reaction to the event has been straightforward. Al Jazeera Mubashir -- the network's equivalent to C-SPAN -- aired the event on March 19 at 1900 GMT. END SUMMARY

MEDIA FREEDOM GOOD, REGULATION BAD

¶2. (SBU) On March 17, the Brookings-Doha Center organized a panel discussion entitled, "Forward or Backward? The 2008 Arab Satellite TV Charter and the Future of Arab Media, Society and Democracy," with Charge, Al Jazeera English Deputy Director Ibrahim Helal, and Egyptian human rights activist and American University of Cairo professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim. In their opening remarks, all three panelists characterized the Arab League charter adopted on February 12 as a threat to media freedom, and an inappropriate attempt by politicians to protect themselves at the expense of the public's right to information. Helal allowed that there were some satellite channels "promoting hate and violence," which "cannot be put into the same category as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya when defending media freedom." Arab media outlets, however, were "too divided" and "should have come together before this to regulate ourselves and talk with each other about our standards." He noted that Al Jazeera had adopted and made public a code of ethics in early 2004, to which he said the network adheres closely. The charter, in his opinion, represented

an attempt by the Egyptian Government to crack down on domestic independent satellite channels, which the regime had been slow to recognize were skirting laws barring them from reporting on news by incorporating current events into their talk shows.

¶3. (SBU) Saad Eddin Ibrahim said he did not believe that the sub-standard quality of some satellite stations was behind the creation of the charter, but that Al Jazeera was the "elephant in the room" when Arab Ministers of Information held their first-ever emergency session to discuss and adopt the charter. Arab autocrats, he said, "are trying once again to close the Arab mind, and we must do all we can now to defend the few windows that we have still open," including broadcast satellite channels. Dr. Ibrahim encouraged people to show signs of civil disobedience in the days before the next Arab League meeting to discuss the charter, scheduled for June. Individuals could, he suggested, put black flags in their windows, or turn off their lights for an evening in protest.

¶4. (SBU) Speaking last, Charge described the long history of press freedom in the United States, beginning with protections in the Bill of Rights, and quoting Thomas Jefferson's preference of living in a country without government, rather than a country without newspapers if forced to choose, due to the vital importance of the press in a free society. Charge then described how most laws serve to protect journalists, and how regulations of the free airwaves are arrived at through legislation written by democratically elected representatives, and reviewed by an independent judiciary. The USG believes, he said, that media is best regulated through professional associations

DOHA 00000237 002 OF 003

which adopt codes and standards of conduct, rather than the whims of politicians seeking to protect themselves at the expense of the public's right to know.

SPARRING WITH AL JAZEERA

¶5. (SBU) Brookings' moderator then asked Charge how the USG squares Jeffersonian ideals about a free press with its "rough history with Al Jazeera" and the fact that it sometimes chooses not to engage and even ban certain media outlets. Charge responded that the USG had serious concerns with Al Jazeera's coverage of events in Iraq, particularly in 2003, and that we had aired these differences publicly. Despite these differences, Al Jazeera was invited to embed a journalist with U.S. troops, and has always operated in Washington, DC and throughout America without restrictions.

¶6. (SBU) Ibrahim Helal then intervened, denying that Al Jazeera was allowed to embed any reporters with U.S. troops, and that in fact, their correspondent had to "sneak into Iraq through Kuwait" and was mistreated by the U.S. military once he arrived in Iraq. Al Jazeera had endured the U.S. bombing of its bureaus in Afghanistan and the killing of one of its journalists, he said, so "we should now talk loudly about how the U.S. Government's policies have helped the Arab Ministers of Information arrive at where they are now." Later in the program, Saad Eddin Ibrahim noted that "certain administration officials who promoted freedom a few years ago now promote stability, which is just a code word for stagnation." That is why, he continued, "there is a feeling that Washington and Tel Aviv are behind this charter and why Al Jazeera has been banned in the United States."

¶7. (SBU) CDA immediately objected on both occasions, stating that any allegation that the United States deliberately targeted a news bureau or murdered a

journalist is "ludicrous and offensive." Al Jazeera has never been banned in the United States, he added, and it is available to anyone who wants to see it by satellite. If cable companies choose not to carry it, that is a commercial decision, not a political one. The fact is that Al Jazeera English is competing against a variety of well-established English news networks, and simply has not made a convincing case to cable companies that carrying it -- as opposed to some other station -- would be more profitable.

LET'S COME TOGETHER

18. (SBU) Charge reminded the panelists that they had come together to discuss the Arab League media charter, not the USG's relationship with Al Jazeera, so the conversation should stay focused on that topic. Helal and Dr. Ibrahim took the opportunity in response to further questions from the audience to reiterate their desire to see Arab media outlets come together to discuss a common code of ethics -- particularly to avoid the specter of self-censorship -- and for the general public to register its discontent with this attempt to restrict the media. "What they are going to continue doing in June," Dr. Ibrahim said, in reference to the next Arab League meeting on the charter, "is not regulation, but strangulation."

MEDIA REACTION

19. (U) Qatari media reaction was mostly straightforward but scant reporting in the English media, with only the Qatar Tribune devoting a front-page, above-the-fold article to it. Arabic daily al-Raya printed a headline for an otherwise balanced article that focused on the differences aired by Helal and the Charge. Arabic daily al-Watan provided overall straightforward reporting, with a full-page spread inside its March 19 edition.

COMMENT

DOHA 00000237 003 OF 003

10. (SBU) Al Jazeera Mubashir, the network's channel that provides live coverage of conferences and proceedings not unlike C-SPAN in the United States, recorded the event and then aired it on March 19 at 1900 GMT. Post found the event an excellent opportunity to publicly support media freedom - a value it ostensibly shares with Al Jazeera and the Qatari leadership - while also forcefully answering Al Jazeera's oft-repeated charges of USG targeting of its people and facilities. We were pleased to see that Al Jazeera had the decency to air the exchange unedited and, through translation, in Arabic.

RATNEY